

Researching the Mediterranean

Problems and perspectives of
the new generation of researchers
on the Arab world and Mediterranean
in Spain and the United Kingdom

PROBLEMS AND PERSPECTIVES OF THE NEW GENERATION OF RESEARCHERS ON THE ARAB WORLD AND MEDITERRANEAN IN SPAIN AND THE UNITED KINGDOM

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There are a number of names in English for what are usually called in Spanish young researchers: *junior researchers*, *young researchers*, *early career scholars*, etc. With nuances, this refers to a large group, often in unstable situations but with the potential to enhance the amount and the quality of research into the Arab and Muslim World and the study of the Mediterranean region in both Spain and the United Kingdom.

This contribution, summarising the five authors' impressions, focuses on some of the challenges confronting young researchers in both countries. The text has taken shape around three main questions. The research agenda is the first of these, followed by methodological questions, the researchers' place on the job market and funding difficulties encountered throughout research. Finally, a proposal is made for a Mediterranean Summer *Encuentro*.

Some of the issues highlighted by this contribution were raised and debated at a workshop dealing specifically with the situation of young researchers, held at the CIDOB Foundation on 9 March 2006. The workshop was attended by nearly fifty debutee researchers, those seeking their place, and those now established, from a variety of disciplines and institutions, but with a common interest in the Mediterranean and Middle East. Two days later, as part of the Hispanic-British Encuentro organised by the British Council, these same questions were debated once more in a broader context. On both occasions, there was fruitful debate among researchers following different paths, which we hope to have synthesised here.

The research agenda

This may well be where the greatest differences are to be found between young Spanish and British researchers. For the Spanish, two questions continue to carry greater weight as part of the research agenda: Morocco, and questions linked to immigration from Islamic countries. For the British, the Middle East has greater weight, notably in the increasing importance of the study of security and political Islam, where Spanish academia lags somewhat behind. This is all thoroughly analysed in the studies in this volume on the state of research in Spain and the United Kingdom, so the focus here is upon the impact of that reality on young researchers. For this group, awareness of the fact that certain aspects attract more interest than others is one element that may help them to decide on their research subject.

If then there are subjects that receive more attention than others, thought may be given to whether they are to some extent over-studied or over-exploited. In other words, are questions of Morocco or migration-related problems over-studied and over-exploited in Spain? This question can be approached in two ways.

One is to consider that the academic community cannot deal in the same depth with all possible subjects on the agenda, so that it is logical and even desirable that there should be a critical mass able to nurture strong research groups in at least some areas. Thus young researchers are able to find the expertise (and sometimes the funding) that enables them to conclude their research satisfactorily, avoiding the feeling of solitude they often encounter during their work.

Contrasting clearly with this perception, complaints about such a concentration in certain areas of research grow among researchers in Spain or the United Kingdom who feel that they have chosen a secondary if not marginal area of research in their academic community.

All in all, we do not think there are subjects that are over-studied, and we believe that the choice of studies where there is already a tradition of research falls within a logic of research efficiency. At the same time, we find that there are numerous fields that are under-studied, almost virgin territory, something that is much more frequent in Spain than in the United Kingdom because of differing academic traditions and for diverse reasons. In any event, this reality makes it perhaps even more desirable to improve the channels of communication between the Spanish and British research communities, and to develop contacts with other research communities in Europe, the Arab and Islamic World, and elsewhere.

Methodological aspects

Because of the disciplinary diversity of Mediterranean studies, it is not possible to evaluate or analyse in depth the shared methodological practices and the challenges to be confronted in this field. It must however be emphasised that this facet is frequently debated among young researchers. Basically, two methodology-related aspects are usually tackled: problems of fieldwork and its methodological practice, and the role of the area's languages, chiefly Arabic, but also Turkish.

The Barcelona meetings emphasised, firstly, in connection with the former, problems of research on the ground in fieldwork, the importance of integrating varied methodologies from disciplines such as sociology, anthropology and ethnography, even among researchers from the field of International Relations not necessarily familiar with these techniques.

Fieldwork is also one of the major difficulties for young researchers, involving as it does one or more trips to the area of study. This is expensive, so that in most cases it becomes necessary to be able to draw on additional financing, which is often hard to find. At the same time, and perhaps more decisive than the financial aspect, young researchers emphasised their concern at the difficulty of finding suitable links on the ground to support and aid research when undertaking fieldwork, especially in the institutional and academic worlds.

Another facet worth mentioning refers to the preference for quantitative analysis among officialdom and thus reflected in the scholarship and funding system for research. Here, there is a long tradition in the United States, to a large degree conditioning the areas of interest of academic research. However, many would argue that the role of qualitative analysis is to define what quantitative analysis must do.

Finally, one of the greatest concerns of this group is the learning and usage of Mediterranean languages as methodological tools. Because the Arab World is the main subject of study (although the panorama in Great Britain is somewhat more diverse), the debate usually centres on Arabic. This is generally considered an essential working tool for much research, although the difficulties in learning and using the language such as, among other things, the diglossia between *fushà* Arabic and local dialects, or a lack of teacher training, mean that this becomes relative depending on each researcher's field of interest and discipline. Although Arabic (or Turkish, Farsi, Hebrew, etc.) may be vital in much research, it must be emphasised that in some projects it is not. According to the field, the subject matter, accessibility of sources and the type of fieldwork required, if any, the learning of these languages may prove to be a minor question compared with the utility of other tools. This is a conclusion usually drawn by young researchers; language is a tool, making it necessary to discover whether or not it is a necessary one.

All in all, as a tool, the use of the languages of the area - Arabic, Turkish, Persian, Tamashek,¹ etc. - occupies a place of great interest among researchers and the tendency is, particularly in the United Kingdom, to reinforce language study. Both in linguistic terms and in other methodological aspects, the tendency in Spain is also toward an interdisciplinary focus.

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Translator's Note: Tamashek is a Bereber language used mainly among the Tuareg community

Research and the job market

While matters related to the research agenda and methodological questions are aspects where young researchers' problems are not so different from those of their established counterparts and academics, aid in launching a research career and later entry to the job market are more specific to this group or, in any event, are areas where the perspectives of young researchers, and their specific problems, do differ.

Three elements must be mentioned in connection with this point. The first refers to the financial difficulties of beginning a research career. There are different categories of pre-doctoral scholarships in each country. Independent of the possibilities of successful application, those who have received such scholarships criticise two aspects of them. On the one hand, their duration, periods of more than the usual four years being often suggested, particularly if a language has to be learned in order to pursue the research. On the other hand, greater facilities and more flexibility for fieldwork is suggested, adjusted to the specific needs of each research area.

A second facet relates to the future outlook for generations of researchers at the training stage. 'The day after' is seen with concern in both the United Kingdom and in Spain among those fortunate enough to be on pre-doctoral scholarships. Is research a professional opening in itself? Thus these generations of researchers view with concern the difficulties of access to university teaching as an alternative to a research career. And this is the context in which another question is raised. Could research become a springboard into other fields of work? That happens frequently. Deprived of financial resources to take their research forward, student researchers can find professional openings related to their subject of study, although that may require a recycling process and change of focus which is sometimes drastic. Unfortunately, this usually dashes long-term research plans in the form of PhD theses.

A third aspect we would like to place on the table is whether channels should be enhanced between the powers that be and the research world. Institutions working daily or sporadically on matters connected with the Mediterranean and the Arab World commonly blame researchers (irrespective of their level of training) because, in many subjects requiring expertise, they find it difficult to locate specialised researchers. Some researchers are however reluctant to think that their agenda might be shaped by outside agents, in this case the authorities. In the light of both attitudes, we believe that greater contact between academics and practitioners is at least desirable; the public administrations or the private sector are not always aware of the fields where the research community is at work, while the academic world may not be familiar with the subjects which may at a given time move to the top of the political or business agenda. Synergies beneficial to both might well be the upshot of greater contact, greater understanding.

Conclusion

This résumé of debates at the seminar on the problems of young researchers held at the Fundación CIDOB and the Spanish-British Encuentro sponsored by the British Council points to the realities, challenges, problems and the opportunities for new generations of researchers, which do not differ greatly from Spain to the United Kingdom. It is also seen that, in many aspects, the young researchers are researchers above all and so share concerns and problems with the more established generations.

Thus one of the conclusions drawn from these *encuentros* relates to enhanced co-operation between the two countries' academic communities, either through formalised regular contacts, or informally. That would allow experiences to be exchanged, and enable synergies to be found to improve and extend European research on the Mediterranean and the Arab-Islamic World.

Proposal for a Mediterranean Summer Encuentro

In the follow-up to the *Encuentro* in Barcelona in March 2006, one of the possible suggestions made to further enhance the dynamism amongst young researchers is to hold a Mediterranean Summer School as the **Mediterranean Summer Encounter of Young Researchers (MSE)**. As the summary of the young researcher sessions reflects, the main hurdles encountered by young researchers investigating the Mediterranean are three-fold: methodological, financial and linguistic.

Building on the synergy that came out from the *encuentro* between Spanish and UK young researchers, this Mediterranean Summer Encuentro will gather young researchers from both sides of the Mediterranean in order to compare and exchange their research and ideas and experiences in conducting research in this region. The proposed duration of the MSE is 5 days, the fifth day perhaps devoted to a visit in the country hosting the Encuentro, to its political institutions and research centres. The first MSE would preferably take place in a Mediterranean country to avoid visa problems and facilitate the participation of local researchers.

The MSE will alternate between research workshops, training sessions and 'Discovering the Mediterranean' sessions.

- *Research workshops* would allow young researchers to present their research in the form of panels predefined according to subject matter (one on migration issues, another on institutional issues, another on economic matters...) proposed by the young researchers themselves. Two senior academic experts who have read the papers in advance will attend each workshop and provide young researchers with feedback on theoretical and methodological questions, and also on presentation techniques. There should be no more than 3 to 4 PhD students on each panel presenting their research, to allow time for discussion and the exchange of ideas.
- *Training sessions* would involve lectures by experienced academics on different mainstreaming methodological aspects felt necessary when researching the Mediterranean and Arab World. By way of illustration, the following might be possible themes: 'Interviewing techniques in Arab countries', 'Preparing Mediterranean fieldtrips', 'Linking Mediterranean research with policy-making', 'Teaching the Mediterranean'...
- *Discovering the Mediterranean sessions* will enable young researchers and established academics each to learn more about the region they are studying. Here, depending on the location of the MSE, local NGOs, think-tanks and even artistic associations or the media would be asked to present their work, their perspectives ... A way of linking research to direct contact with people and cultures.

The results of the MSE would be gathered in a report and in articles that might be offered to academic journals or published as a book by the MSE sponsors. Even more importantly, the momentum from the first MSE would be used to put into place a flexible network of young researchers working in the Mediterranean and the Arab World, to extend the experience of the Spanish FIMAM. Ideally, the network would lead to the creation of a website where reports and papers presented at the MSE would be posted, but also where sections would be devoted to exchanging information, networking, and techniques of fieldwork for young researchers on both sides of the Mediterranean. The domain names www.researchingthemediterranean.eu or www.encuentromediterraneo.eu should be registered immediately.

Additionally, to distribute information and give visibility to the MSE and to the network of young researchers, at the end of the MSE, four delegates would be designated from among the participants to form a committee to ensure follow-up on activities, provide information and write the symposium up, although its main task would be to organise the following year's MSE, designing its programme, calling for papers for workshops and panels, engaging speakers, and seeking and maintaining contact with the sponsoring institutions.